

Double standards result from EU trade policies

Written by Madi Sharma on 18 December 2018



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The role of civil society, businesses, trade unions and even the beneficiary countries themselves is still unclear as trade becomes the sole focus of the EU in an ever-increasing protectionist global market.

China is the classic example - one of Europe's largest trading partners, with no trade agreement and no mention of human rights.

However, there are some EU trade programs, such as the Generalised Scheme of Preferences, GSP and GSP+ which do have rules on governance, international conventions on labour and human rights.

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Sadly, even they are being violated by beneficiary countries without any sanctions or redress from the EU, in part due to the fact that cheap goods are now a requirement of European consumers.

Trade is no longer a value chain, but one where we seek to devalue as much as possible the products and the people making them.

The European Commission likes to infer that trade subsidy programmes such as GSP+, GSP and EBA aid poor countries in reinvigorate their markets overseas. Additionally, they are said to increase labour and human rights standards of businesses, as required by the European Parliament and savvy consumers; and they allow a dialogue around good governance and human rights.

Different stakeholders gather around the table - people who would normally not discuss together - and this helps open a debate on uncomfortable human rights issues. A first step to making change.

“Such double standards not only put the European Commission programs in jeopardy, but also put European values at risk and furthermore give the rest of the world a chance to cite the hypocrisy of the European Union”

This is all great in theory, but the reality is quite different and varied across subsidy recipients.

GSP+ is granted with strict prerequisite criteria for access to the scheme. However, once the trade subsidy has been granted the attitude of the Commission is to not withdraw it if violations occur, for fear of losing the established dialogue with the country.

The question therefore is why is there a need for a scheme with stringent criteria if the Trade Commission is just going to ignore the rules which everyone is obliged to comply - and why is there a difference in treatment between one violating country and another?

Such double standards not only put the European Commission programs in jeopardy, but also put European values at risk and furthermore give the rest of the world a chance to cite the hypocrisy of the European Union.

So, whilst it may well retain a dialogue with one country, it is losing respect from many others.

With an EBA, GSP, GSP+ review next year, civil society must start to ask the question “At what cost?”

It is true, any withdrawal from the scheme would not be beneficial for the recipient. But when major human rights violations take place in a country, when businesses are owned by friends of the government, where trade unions are banned and where women on the factory floor receive less than the State's minimum wage and have no legal right to fight their case as they do not have contracts, whose pockets is the European Commission ultimately lining?

My concern is that countries such as Pakistan and Philippines receive GSP+. Pakistan is on the

Terrorism Financing List, accused of State-sponsored terrorism and Philippines are being investigated by the International Criminal Court for extrajudicial killings.

In both cases Europe is providing import subsidies so that consumers can have cheap products.

So, is the new trade policy of the European Union to offset our development values?

About the author

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